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ABSTRACT

An "orientation" checklist is proposed to aid the adult basic education (ABE) teacher in preparing for instruction. The list reflects a number of issues teachers should consider carefully before meeting with students. The issues concern (1) information about the learners and their characteristics and needs that can be taken into account in planning instruction; (2) the teacher's view of his/her role as teacher given the content and group of learners, i.e., teacher- or learner-centered; (3) learning outcomes that provide the guiding framework for each student's learning plan; (4) "hidden" issues of content that should concern the teacher; (5) planning to provide opportunity for transferability; (6) type of instructional materials the teacher will use and encourage; (7) structuring of the learning environment to maximize student's physical and psychological comfort; and (8) approaches to reduce ambiguity and to resolve expectations at the first class meeting. (YLB)

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TECHNíQUES

Edited from the Virginia ABE Newsletter

Preparation for Instruction

by *Edward F. Jones, George Mason University and Jean H. Lowe, Fairfax County Public Schools*

No one knows better than ABE students and instructors just how challenging and complicated teaching and learning can be. So we need to ask: Is there a way to minimize the complications so that the challenges can be met? While there is certainly no simple answer to this question, we believe that perhaps the most crucial time for both teacher and student occurs at the very beginning of their relationship – or even before it starts – in the assumptions that each of them brings to the teaching/learning experience. Regrettably, as our high dropout rates attest, beginnings may be one of the things we do least well in Adult Basic Education. In the remainder of this article we will discuss some ideas about your first meeting with students and some things for teachers to think about as they prepare for instruction.

As a tentative guide to promoting strategic, as opposed to automatic, decision making, we propose a sort of "orientation" checklist to aid the teacher in preparing for instruction. This list reflects a number of issues which we believe teachers should consider carefully before meeting with students.

1. *What do you know (and what can you find out) about your learners? What characteristics and needs of your learner population can you take into account in planning instruction?*

These are perhaps the most basic questions to be addressed in preparing for instruction and ones which cannot be completely answered until teachers and learners meet. At the same time, however, based on your own past experience, the experiences of other teachers, research and demographic information about ABE learners and data from pre-registrations, it is possible to establish some tentative hypotheses about the probable nature of your students which can be confirmed, rejected, or expanded at your first meeting. Are your students recent public school dropouts? Mothers hoping to begin full-time employment? Recently laid off from work? Illiterate? Coming to class after work? The immediate and long term learning goals of students may differ radically depending on their previous educational experiences, confidence levels, and total life circumstances. These differences should determine the manner in which you approach each individual learner *from the very beginning*. For example, you may need to organize instruction so that it is less fatiguing to a construction worker who comes to class already physically exhausted or provide emotional support to a welfare recipient taking the first step in preparing to get a job.

2. *How do you view your role as teacher given your assigned content and group of learners? Will the learning environment be teacher-centered or learner-centered?*

Will you make all the decisions concerning content, organization, and evaluation, or will you encourage learners to share in these responsibilities by having them determine what they wish to study and encouraging them to formulate their own questions? Any teacher who has tried the latter approach with ABE students knows that it can be frustrating, but it may also be more consistent with the development of student maturity, confidence, and self-sufficiency. Will you be a "stand-up expert" who dispenses

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knowledge in your classroom or will you be a resource who helps learners to guide their own study? Will you be primarily concerned with the questions implied by the subject matter or the questions of the students themselves, which they may find difficult to express? How will you discuss your view of teaching with the student who may have different expectations resulting from previous school experiences? How can you be a facilitator if the student expects an "authority?" The manner in which you respond to these questions will have a substantial impact upon your approach to instruction and upon the relationships you develop with your students.

3. *What "hoped-for" learning outcomes should provide the guiding framework for each student's learning plan?*

We are not referring in this case to the administratively determined goals of your adult education program nor to the content objectives associated with any particular curriculum. Certainly these are factors which a teacher must take into account in planning instruction along with students' abilities and motivations to learn. What can a particular student be reasonably expected to achieve in the direction of the goals which have motivated his or her ABE involvement in the first place? How can this be accomplished within the contexts of program goals and resources given the student's abilities and limitations? The teacher must consider these issues carefully, make decisions, and act. It is the teacher's responsibility to help the student to develop a plan of study focused on goals which are both meaningful and attainable given all of the constraints which are present within the teaching/learning environment.

It is important to remember that not all individualized learning objectives fall into the category of *content* outcomes. Especially for students who are new or very apprehensive about formal learning situations, special attention should be given by the teacher to *nurturant* outcomes, how a learner reacts to and feels about the learning experience. Regardless of initial academic success, a student's feelings will determine his or her attitudes towards future formal educational opportunities.

4. *What "hidden" issues of content should concern you?*

Since successful ABE classrooms and learning centers often tend to rely more heavily on teacher interpersonal skills than on comprehensive content knowledge, certain "hidden" areas of content may be overlooked. Since these vary considerably according to content areas, they are more easily illustrated than defined.

For example, what does it mean when a student says to you, "I want to learn to read better?" Both of you have ideas about what reading better means, but it is possible that your ideas do not agree. Your idea may be that reading is a way to get meaning from the printed page. But what happens if the learner thinks learning to read is just sounding out words (as research tells us most poor readers do) and is not focused upon meaning at all? The point is that in any teaching/learning situation your definition of reading will influence how you teach and the student's implicit definition will determine how he or she learns. Both of you need to examine systematically and discuss what you are about and whether or not your views are compatible.

What about the students who wants to get a GED? Again you need to discover what the learner already knows about the GED test, the content, format and scoring. The teacher needs to be able to discuss these issues with students and clear up misconceptions. Students may have more specific questions such as: Is there a penalty for guessing? Can you pass math if you have never had algebra? How much time is there? Is the test all reading or are there questions about science? Can the test be taken over again? The teacher's responsibilities don't stop with mastery of content. The student may require considerable orientation to the testing process and need some classroom experience with test-like questions and formats.

5. *What will you do to ensure transferability?*

Are the purposes of your classroom or learning center activities strictly academic, such as preparing for the GED, or are you teaching concepts and skills that are intended to be transferred to the student's workplace or daily life? If the latter is true, what can you do to increase the chances that such transfer will actually occur? A number of opportunities exist based on your knowledge of the student's life and work experiences. These include, for example, the use of work-related instructional materials and a variety of post learning follow-up activities. The point is that you should not take for granted that classroom learning will be utilized in daily life unless you plan instruction in a manner which provides the opportunity for applying and practicing new skills in the student's real world.

6. *What sorts of instructional materials will you use and encourage?*

This issue follows naturally from the previous two questions relating to instructional goals and to transferability. What are the purposes of ABE? What are the objectives of your particular class? Your answers to these questions will determine the extent to which you will promote the use of teacher-made and student acquired materials on the one hand as opposed to prepackaged lesson plans and sequential published materials on the other.

Here again the student may have some preconceived notions. For example, only a fill-in-the-blank workbook may be acceptable at first. Many of the real life materials we use today were not available in the past and may not seem "school-like" enough. A simple discussion of why you have chosen these materials will reassure most learners.

7. *How will you structure the learning environment in order to maximize the student's physical and psychological comfort?*

ABE teachers rarely have much control over location or classroom furnishings, but where possible, maximizing student comfort should be considered. Adult-sized chairs and tables tell learners something about their importance. And the arrangement of desks and tables can determine whether students work together or individually and says something about the degree of formality expected in the classroom.

In the areas of psychological comfort, the teacher's opportunities are usually somewhat greater. What can be done to make the students feel more at home, not only with the instructor but with each other? Introductions, use of first names, structured group activities, breaks and refreshments, peer tutoring and a variety of other instructional and social devices may help, but most of these require careful advance planning. And once again, the adult learner probably has some ideas of how things should be. Calling teachers by their first names may seem strange at first. And while we may know that student interaction is instructionally sound, this may be a new idea to many learners. We also need to identify students who are easily distracted so that they can be placed in a location with minimal confusion.

8. *What will you do to reduce ambiguity and to resolve expectations at the first class meeting?*

Regardless of the nature and extent of pre-program publicity, all learners, especially insecure ABE students, tend to approach formal learning situations with a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity. According to Stubblefield (unpublished, 1974), the instructor can approach this ambiguity in at least two ways, either by using it or by reducing it. On the one hand, the teacher may invite students to talk about what they expect to get out of their learning experience and how they expect to go about it. On the other, the teacher may simply tell students what they will be expected to do and for what intended benefits. Often a combination of these approaches can be employed successfully.

Each individual adult learner, approaches the classroom or learning center with a series of assumptions or presumed needs with respect to learning content, process, and time commitment. Thus, according to Stubblefield, the teacher must deal with *what* students want to learn, *how* they want to learn, and the *time* in which they have to learn. If these expectations differ considerably from the planned program, then these differences have to be reconciled. Either provision must be made to meet "unplanned expectations" or learners must be given reasons why their expectations cannot be met.

An especially sensitive area in the resolution of expectations occurs when it becomes necessary for the teacher to help a learner modify his or her aspirations without depressing the student's morale. Once the student feels comfortable in school, the teacher must be responsive to the learner's hopes and needs, and help him or her develop a plan of study which will provide some sense of accomplishment without misleading the learner about what can be accomplished in a short period of time. This process, naturally, cannot be completed at the first session, but will occur gradually as trust develops between the teacher and learner. This is, at best, a difficult and challenging undertaking for which there are no guaranteed recipes for success. Nonetheless, we believe that a teacher who has thought about how to deal with a non-reader who expects to read the Bible or acquire a GED in a few short months of part-time study will handle this situation more effectively for having considered it in advance.